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Finding Receptive Souls and Teaching Them Directly

In describing an intensive program of growth, the Universal House of Justice in its 27 December 2005 message explained that the objective of the expansion phase was "to widen the circle of those interested in the Faith, to find receptive souls and to teach them." The question that might arise is "What's the best way to teach these souls?" This is answered in the same paragraph of that message: "Experience suggests that the more closely teaching approaches and methods are aligned with the capacity acquired from the study of the institute courses the more rewarding the results."

When studying Ruhi Institute Book 6 "Teaching the Cause," we learn to distinguish between sharing information about the Faith and conveying concepts that will help a seeker recognize the station of Bahá'u'lláh and embrace the Cause. The teaching method that participants strive to emulate is the one informally referred to as "Anna's presentation." This is offered as a model of how to teach the Faith directly, with the aim of inviting an individual to join the Faith at the end of the presentation. Believers all over the world have been striving to align their teaching approaches with the learning acquired in Book 6 and are recording outstanding results from this direct method of teaching.

A few words should be said in relation to the term *direct teaching*. Shoghi Effendi characterized direct teaching as "an open and bold assertion of the fundamental verities of the Cause" whereas indirect teaching, he wrote, is "a less direct and more cautious method of teaching," consisting of "presenting some of the humanitarian or social teachings of the Cause." Direct teaching, therefore, relates to the method of teaching and not to the venue. It is not synonymous with "street teaching," which may involve direct teaching or may, for example, merely consist of a campaign to distribute leaflets. Presenting the message directly can take place in a fireside, a home visit, or other personal encounters. However, so often the case has been that the friends have not utilized these opportunities for directly sharing the message of Bahá'u'lláh but have been *indirect* in approach, never openly teaching seekers about the station and mission of Bahá'u'lláh and thus not responding to the receptivity that the House of Justice has told us currently exists in society at large.

This issue of the newsletter focuses on the "rewarding results" the believers in diverse clusters have achieved when they have shifted the focus of their efforts to a direct teaching approach and applied the concepts learned in the institute courses. The surge in the level of enrollments has surpassed their expectations and their successes have endowed them with growing confidence. The stories confirm in moving terms the sentiment from the Guardian that "everyone is a potential teacher."

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An important step in undertaking direct teaching endeavors has been preparation. Sometimes the believers practiced simple role-playing exercises on how to approach others, but often they have tried to memorize all or parts of the teaching presentation in Book 6. The most effective sessions of this type have been "active refreshers"—three- to four-hour review workshops followed by action, such as a direct teaching activity that same day.

Canada

In countries where historically it has seemed difficult to speak forthrightly about the Faith, the friends have been amazed at how eager many people are to hear about the Bahá'í Teachings when presented in a systematic manner. This was a realization in the **Vancouver** cluster, Canada, where four Auxiliary Board members held a conference for their assistants and dedicated one day of the program to building capacity for direct teaching. On that day, the morning was devoted to brief refresher training on "Anna's presentation," and in the afternoon 27 believers, grouped into 11 teams, carried out a number of home visits. Appointments had been made in advance with the non-Bahá'í participants in the core activities in Vancouver and surrounding areas who had agreed to receive a visit to learn more about the Faith.

When the teams returned to the conference in the evening to share their experiences, their spirits were truly exhilarated. Team after team related remarkable stories of how anxiety and hesitation, even deep reluctance to get involved, had given way to confidence and joy as the teaching conversations had progressed.

> Before this weekend I didn't get it. Then when we looked at "Anna's presentation" I thought, "I get it!" and then we went out and then I really got it!! The couple asked questions and in the end they declared! I left there wanting to do another home visit.
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> This was my first home visit with "Anna's presentation." It is very direct. Anna doesn't beat around the bush—she just goes for it. That is what made this so powerful. In the past I have perhaps made the Faith a set of ideals and explained what we believed in—but then, lots of other people do, too. But right from the very beginning Anna talks about Bahá'u'lláh. She is amazing. I love Anna! Even if you don't think you are capable or you aren't as eloquent as Anna, just have faith in this process—it works!

As the friends related what they had experienced, the atmosphere became more joyful and spirited. What became clear was that the spiritual connections with the seekers, the sincere desire to deliver the message, as well as the beautiful explanations in the presentation had combined to create profound teaching encounters. From the reports that evening, the workings of divine assistance were palpable. It emerged that five of the souls visited had embraced the Faith when invited to do so!

An equally remarkable fruit of the day's efforts was the friends' vastly increased audacity and courage in teaching the Faith directly. It was also wonderful to see how rapidly the capacity for effective teaching can be enhanced. The assistants were urged to keep practicing their newfound skills and to accompany other friends to do the same. The result has been that in the clusters where these assistants reside they have helped others to gain these skills, and the rate of enrollments in their areas has doubled.

France

The friends in France concluded that it was essential that those coordinating the work of the institute process gain experience and confidence with direct teaching using "Anna's presentation." The program for the National Coordinators' Conference was therefore revised in order to add opportunities for the 40 participants to practice direct teaching in the **Paris** environs. After reviewing case studies about teaching teams and doing over three hours of refresher training on the concepts in "Anna's presentation," the conference participants were ready to move into the field of action. Thanks to arrangements made by the host communities, they were able to carry out home visits to 20 seekers in the area and to take part in several

well-organized firesides that matched seekers to conference participants, including a fireside with an Arabic-speaking believer for seekers from Muslim countries. The friends learned that it was not as difficult as they thought to invite seekers to become Bahá'ís. Three individuals declared, a few others said that they just needed more time to think about it, and four new seekers agreed to join a study circle!

The participants learned a number of other lessons through their experiences during the conference weekend. They found it feasible to cover all of "Anna's presentation" during a fireside, even with time allotted for questions. The more intimate the group, the more effective the effort was. It also proved helpful to organize how the presentation would be given in advance and to divide it among two or three speakers. The friends were careful at the firesides to create a clear separation between casual socializing and the presentation itself. The seekers were especially touched by the quotations from the Writings. Visual aids also proved to be effective.

Maybe the greatest learning was that the seekers did not feel surprised or uncomfortable by invitations to join the Faith or a study circle when the invitation was extended at the conclusion of the teaching presentation. Often the invitation was phrased in the following manner: "If you choose to become a Bahá'í…"

Australia

A bold teaching initiative in the **Perth** cluster during the current cycle involved visits to homes in the vicinity of the institute building, a prominent landmark in the neighborhood. Initial trepidations were overcome as 33 of the 84 conversations conducted during the first four days of the two-week expansion phase elicited a keen interest in the Faith. In addition to extending an invitation to attend an information evening at the center, a significant number of conversations led to a presentation based on the material in Book 6, which team members had spent time studying and practicing beforehand. One believer shared a moving account of the experience of her teaching team:

> God bless my partner on the teaching team yesterday afternoon. She and I experienced for the first time after living 24 years in Australia how receptive souls can be found everywhere. I could not believe the receptivity of people and the way they accepted the information. When I encouraged my apprehensive teammate to knock on the door of one of the houses, I said, "Do so in memory of your late husband." She did. As it turned out, the woman who answered the door knew of the Faith, remembered attending one of the meetings with a friend and how enjoyable it was. She had wanted to find out more and was waiting for another opportunity to come again. Tonight she came to the evening meeting!

Macau

It has been found that first telling a person about the teachings of the Faith and then inviting them to attend a Bahá'í activity is usually more effective than simply issuing an invitation. The problem for many people is how to begin the conversation. A number of teachers from the **Macau** cluster recounted how they approached their contacts. These suggestions emerged from an evaluation session that 16 friends had after participating in a teaching project. These reflections were valuable in preparing themselves for the next expansion phase of their intensive program of growth.

- The opening I used most often in making presentations to contacts was to mention that they had either known me or another Bahá'í, or had heard about the Faith, but I wished to share the Teachings systematically with them as we had never done so. No one ever said "No."

- I found that talking about human nature from the section "Life and Death" in Book 1 and asking the seekers questions on these main concepts leads nicely to the part where the soul needs the Divine Educator in order to fully progress. This then connects easily to the theme of the Eternal Covenant in the teaching presentation in Book 6. When I used this approach, it worked with a variety of friends of different backgrounds.

- I learned several ways of approaching people through being teamed up with different partners in the teaching work.

- Overall, "Anna's presentation" proved very appropriate for people in Macau who were familiar with religion. For those from the mainland who had recently arrived, I found it easier to start with an introduction about the maturation of humankind and then go to religion and the Manifestation. I did not try to use "Anna's presentation" but that might work as well. For Filipinos, emphasis on Bahá'u'lláh's life seemed especially important and touching.

During the course of the intensive teaching campaign, the friends in Macau learned the importance of flexibility, wisdom, working together in a team, patience, and tailoring the presentation to the needs and interests of the listeners. They asked questions to find out how the listeners viewed the topics they were presenting. As one of the teachers put it, "I learned that not all concepts need to be shared at one sitting, that it was better to keep seekers wanting to know more than saying too much at once." If the teacher was unable to complete the presentation, this created an opportunity to arrange another visit or to invite the seeker to a Bahá'í gathering to learn more.

The friends are learning that an element critical to the success of their direct teaching encounters is to be more forthright about the station of Bahá'u'lláh and also to develop the confidence to warmly invite seekers to become Bahá'ís. This act is a privilege and service to which Bahá'u'lláh Himself calls us: "…invite thou the receptive souls unto God's holy court, that perchance they may not remain deprived of the heavenly Fountain of living water."

Kiribati

Sometimes it is the seekers themselves who help us realize that the central theme of our presentation should be the station of Bahá'u'lláh and His redemptive message.

> I was at a fireside here in **South Tarawa** that two Bahá'ís were holding during the lunch break at the shipyard, where they worked. A lot of the teaching that has gone on here in the past has been Bible-based, where the Bahá'ís will read quotes from the Bible to explain the coming of Bahá'u'lláh, and that's how this fireside started. There was a large crowd of rough-looking shipbuilders sitting around listening to these two men explain about progressive revelation and read sections from the Bible to back up what they were saying. There were a few questions, but the audience kept pretty quiet until one man (who happened to be the biggest and roughest shipbuilder of them all) started speaking. Because it was all in the I-Kiribati language, I didn't understand what was happening right away and only found out later when someone translated for me, but

because all of the other men started laughing and the Bahá'ís looked a bit embarrassed, I assumed that the man was making fun of them. In reality, the man was saying that they had heard all about the Bible before; they were full of the Bible. What they really wanted to hear from the Bahá'ís was who Bahá'u'lláh was. At this point the Bahá'ís began to read again from the Bible and the man interrupted them again, saying that they had had enough of the Bible, they wanted to hear about Bahá'u'lláh. So another Bahá'í stepped in and told the story of the dream that Bahá'u'lláh's father had about the ocean and the fish. She also talked about the Ruhi books and how you can learn more about the life of Bahá'u'lláh and His teachings in them. The shipbuilders sat and listened intently and when the story was over, the big shipbuilder smiled and thanked her. He said that that was exactly what he had wanted to hear. He was curious about Bahá'u'lláh and wanted to know all about Him, so could he please join one of these Ruhi courses?

Philippines

In the **Ormoc** cluster, a schoolteacher began to teach the Faith directly to some of his students. Previously he had shared with a few of them sections from Book 1. But emboldened by the plans in his cluster for an intensive teaching campaign, he spoke more directly of the Faith and invited them to become Bahá'ís. Five accepted the Faith immediately. A week later, when these new believers came together to study Book 1, the teacher received a surprise.

Today at 4:00 p.m., I gathered the five new youth declarants in our school. To my surprise some of their classmates joined the meeting. As we began, I told them that if they really would like to join the Faith, what we do is to accept Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God for the new age, apply His teachings to our lives, and teach others. I also told them that if you become a Bahá'í, you will not leave Jesus Christ and His teachings because they are fulfilled in the Bahá'í Faith.

After we talked, the nine third-year high school students wrote their names on a sheet of paper as proof of accepting the Faith. We now have 14 newly enrolled students, including the 5 new declarants from yesterday. We have already set a schedule for Book 1 to be studied during afternoon time in my office.

On another day we had a meeting at noon for the 14 new believers in my office. They brought with them three classmates and, of course, I discussed with them some concepts and principles of the Faith. After a while those three youths also embraced the Faith!

Burkina Faso

The most recent expansion phase in the capital, **Ouagadougou**, witnessed 32 enrollments—a sixfold increase over the previous most successful cycle. The friends attribute this dramatic rise in new believers to a more audacious approach by several of the teaching teams. A total of about 160 people were approached during the campaign, and 31 of those who declared their belief in Bahá'u'lláh came from among the 50 or so who received a direct presentation of the Faith based on the material in Book 6.

A recently declared believer, who is from a Christian background, volunteered to teach full time during the expansion phase. She was assigned to the team coordinated by the director of the institute and, with the agreement of her Muslim husband moved to the house of the director's family for the duration of the expansion week. Although initially

> feeling completely inadequate to teach the Faith she proved to be a source of encouragement and joy for all the members of her team.
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> This believer also shared with the other team members that she had been praying fervently for her husband to recognize Bahá'u'lláh. During the course of the expansion phase, Bahá'í neighbors paid a visit to this Muslim gentleman, who knew the Faith and liked Bahá'í prayers. A systematic presentation of the Faith was given to him, using the teaching album. At the end of the encounter he was ready to sign the declaration card that had been given to him and he did so before his wife returned. Sure enough, he was the 32nd new declaration of the teaching campaign! When his wife came back home after the celebration at the National Center, he told her, "Now I'm a Bahá'í!"

Malaysia

The **Sungei Petani** cluster had witnessed entry by troops years ago when believers taught with passion and thousands of receptive souls enrolled. However, the difficulties in consolidating those believers discouraged many from teaching as they had done before. They were fortunate to receive a young and enthusiastic resource person from India who worked closely with the cluster development facilitator to build capacity for the expansion and consolidation phases.

A core group of 35 believers engaged others to form 13 teams and listed contacts who had shown receptivity. The Bahá'ís resolved to teach directly and invite these individuals to enroll instead of just inviting them to core activities as was their usual practice. The teams used different ways to initiate meaningful conversations to introduce the purpose of their visit. Then they used a flipchart to share the first section of "Anna's presentation" because they had found that the attention span of most people was about 20 minutes. After covering the topics of God, the Covenant, the Manifestations of God, and Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation for today, they asked the seekers if they would like to be members of the Bahá'í community and share Bahá'u'lláh's teachings with others. Using this approach, 106 people embraced the Faith. The report shares this experience:

> Most teams have observed radiance and a sparkle in the eyes of the seekers mirroring the spark of faith in their hearts when they declared their acceptance of Bahá'u'lláh and their willingness to join the Bahá'ís in building a better world.

One teaching team encountered the parent of a participant in the junior youth group, who stopped them and, with excitement and impatience, said:

> Why have you not shared these wonderful teachings with me earlier? We have seen the changes in our son and we have learned the prayers and Holy Writings from him. How can we learn more and serve like you?

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